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SHIRLEY BRICE HEATH

Agnes Repplier and Writing as Trial

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Agnes Repplier and Writing as Trial

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Shirley Brice Heath, Professor of English and Linguistics at Stanford University, received her M.A. degree from Ball State University and her Ph.D. from Columbia University. She is one of the foremost literacy scholars in the world. *Ways with Words* (1983), her study of discourse in black and white communities in the Piedmont region of the Carolinas, is a classic. Her work cuts across sociolinguistics, anthropology, and education. During her three different fellowship periods at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1991 and 1992, Brice Heath has spoken on our campuses in Fort Wayne, Gary, Indianapolis, Kokomo, and South Bend as well as at Ball State University.

SHIRLEY BRICE HEATH

Gender and the Essay

Agnes Repplier and Writing as Trial[1]

In October of 1924, Brander Matthews, American theatrical and literary critic, well-known in Paris and London as well as New York, wrote an essay entitled "The Gentle Art of Seasoning an Essay" (*Literary Digest and International Book Review*, Vol. 2, pp. 780-81). After pondering the time-worn yet ever-current question "What is an essay?," he went on to answer that at least two types existed: those fragmentary pieces of distilled wisdom following in the tradition of Marcus Aurelius, Bacon, and Emerson, and those brisk, brilliant and buoyant essays of the familiar type. It is this latter sort of essay that can

> ...marry pathos with humor...[and can be] flowing and free, graceful and charming...a pleasure and a solace....It has no rigidity of form; it can attain to the severe construction of Stevenson and it can relax to the whimsical fantasy of Lamb. It can ramble; it can chat cheerfully; it can even gossip (p. 780).

Matthews goes on to ask: "Why is it, then, there are so few women essayists? Why is it that women of letters who compete on equal terms with men of letters in the field of fiction are rarely their rivals in the kindred art of the essayist?" He admitted that in the roll call of famous novelists, women were represented, but among major essays, there was not

> a single representative of the fair sex—the sex which chats most agreeably, which gossips most attractively, and which often observes with more precision the little things of life; the sex which excels in letter-writing (an essay is only a letter written to a host of unknown friends) (p. 780).

Though we can certainly quarrel with the line of reasoning that brought Matthews to judge women as potentially exceptional essayists—their talents in chat, gossip, and observation—we would do well to pause over his question and to wonder why it has been asked so rarely since the emergence of the essay in English in the sixteenth century. We would do well also to ask why recent work in feminist studies and especially literary studies has continued to focus

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[1]This lecture, given in Bloomington for the Indiana University Institute and Society for Advanced Study on September 20, 1991, is a shortened version of the introduction to *Women, Reading, and Writing: Essays of Agnes Repplier*, edited by Shirley Brice Heath, forthcoming.

attention almost exclusively on searching out and reviving the works of exemplary women—from scientists to photographers to novelists and poets. But these scholars have not raised the issue of why, throughout the history of British and American letters, there have been so few women writing essays.

We know the form best today as one that argues, entertains, attempts to dialogue with readers in a persuasive way, and offers the writer's personal opinions as well as his or her idiosyncratic accumulation of information. Meg Greenfield of *Newsweek* chooses economic and political issues for her essays; Erma Brombeck and Ellen Goodman choose the pathos and humor of daily life; Joan Didion and Annie Dillard rely largely on places, philosophy, and their own personal perceptions in their essays. But aside from the contemporary U.S. women essayists just named—Greenfield, Brombeck, Goodman, Didion, and Dillard — most readers of today would be hard-pressed to recall a single woman essayist of the United States and probably only Virginia Woolf of Great Britain.

It is useful to pause and consider what difference the absence of women's voices and perspectives among essayists might make. When we look at the genres that appear most frequently and across the broadest possible range of contexts, we find that the essay (and its cousin "the piece"—often used to refer to either feature or editorial material) potentially constitute the major portion—aside from straight news articles—of written materials that mainstream adult readers select for their leisure reading. From Sunday magazine inserts to airline magazines, to regular features in magazines and newspapers, as well as to books of essays on topics ranging from travel to popular psychology, the ubiquitous form of presentation is essay-like, even if the majority of these may be very far from bearing lasting literary qualities like those associated with essays of the past by writers such as Virginia Woolf, Francis Bacon, Robert Louis Stevenson, Charles Lamb, and Thomas Huxley. Even the evening news hours on television now refer to portions of their broadcasts as "essays by..." and National Public and American Public Radio read essays by freelance writers as spot material both within and between programs.

The essay then, though with a considerably stretched meaning and form by the end of the twentieth century, stands as a genre that still engages, persuades, argues, informs, and offers the personal opinion of authors whose experience and talents at expression make them worth reading and hearing. But since women have not, in Matthews' words, "competed on equal terms" with men in this field of letters, their voice has been largely absent from this widely-read form. To omit any large segment of the population from a form of expression so ubiquitous and influential in its many contexts is shameful, but not even to ask why there are so few women essayists is even more shameful.

When Matthews raised this question in 1924, he followed it by calling attention to one American woman essayist—Agnes Repplier (1855-1950). Born in Philadelphia into a Catholic family of Swiss origin, Repplier was sent briefly to Switzerland to school, returned to a French convent in Philadelphia, entered a school for girls in the city, and was expelled at the age of fifteen for her "self-will" and refusal to take seriously the duties of formal education. Repplier was left to work out her own education, and she did so by hiding herself away from her harshly cruel mother to read every work of French or English history, fiction, and poetry she could get her hands on. Highly resentful of her daughter's failure to succeed in school (and later bitter over the family's fall from its relatively comfortable economic position), Agnes' mother seemed to take her anger out on her daughter. Numerous stories have survived of her mother's perverse delight in psychologically torturing young Agnes. For example, when Agnes was fifteen, she once described her as looking "like a leper who has had smallpox." When Agnes broke into tears, her mother responded to her daughter's tears with the rebuke: "Why do you behave in this silly way because you have a bad complexion? Mirabeau was ugly and pockmarked, yet he grew up to become one of the great writers of France" (Emma Repplier, *Agnes Repplier: A Memoir*, 1957, p. 35). At sixteen, when the family's business losses increased to a point of crisis, her mother told Agnes to write and to find a market for her work as quickly as possible.

Between sixteen and thirty, when her first book was published, Repplier managed to become the family's major source of support by writing short pieces for a wide array of magazines. Such pieces carry a flavor familiar also in the early personal essays of Virginia Woolf—"occasional pieces" from a keen observer, democratic in spirit, open, and inquisitive. For example, in 1877, when Repplier was twenty-one, she captured the pathos and humor involved in the final sale of her family's home when their economic means had dwindled to the point that they could no longer live there. She recalls the prosperous, highly sociable buyer who obtains the house for much less than the price asked, after weeks of drop-ins at inconvenient hours to ask impertinent questions and to offer critical and proprietary comments about the house. Repplier captures the anguish of those selling their homeplace:

> ...everything about the house becomes regretfully dear to you, and yet their very merits make you more savage. You wish you had never put walnut stairs from top to bottom; pine would be quite good enough for the fellow. You think with regret of the expensive repairing you had done to the roof only last winter.... Your wine closet, your cedar closet, every thoughtful luxury your house contains now only serve to irritate you by their perfections...." (*Agnes Repplier: A Memoir*, p. 40).

Such everyday topics as house-selling, pets, food, and laughter captured her imagination as did weightier topics having to do with writing, women, war, and social conditions. She was not one to write only of the oppression of women; she wrote also of other oppressed groups.

In many of these writings, she sounds shockingly contemporary and tuned in to the problems of the late twentieth century. For example, in an essay entitled "Humors of Gastronomy" written in 1892, she echoes many of today's studies of dieting as well as observations regarding the relative places of men and women as chefs in the world of fine foods. Of all the studies and worrisome talk about overeating, she comments:

> ...we reluctantly infer that gluttony is a vice—or a virtue—for man only, and that woman's part in the programme is purely that of a ministering angel. Adam was made to eat, and Eve to cook for him, although, even in this humble sphere, she and her daughters have been doomed to rank second in command. Excellent in all things, but supreme in none, they have never yet scaled the dazzling heights of culinary fame (*Essays in Miniature*, pp. 130-131).

The satiric wit illustrated here penetrates all her writings, to the point that it is often difficult to separate her straightforward statements from those with a teasing, satiric bite. Her titles sometimes announce her satire, as Swift did with his title "A Modest Proposal." Repplier wrote several essays with such irreverent titles as: "A Short Defence of Villains," "The Oppression of Notes" (meaning footnotes), "Consecrated to Crime," and "The Repeal of Reticence." To almost all her essays, Repplier brought the combination of close observation of her environment and a powerful memory of all that she had read, together with a strong bent for quick character portrayal.

Repplier's earliest writing efforts went to the genre of short stories and it was there that she began her fondness for characterization. But after these initial attempts, she was advised to write essays by an editor who observed that she knew little about life but much about books. Repplier took the advice with regard to genre, but not with regard to the omission of either life or character from her writings. From 1881, when she was 26, until the mid 1940s, when she was in her late eighties, she wrote essays on a wide variety of topics from cats to matters of war and economics to women's issues and poverty. Writing frequently for *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Life*, and *Harper's*, she also published twenty books of essays, five biographies, and a brief autobiography of her days in the French convent school in Philadelphia. She won literary awards from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and honorary degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, Notre Dame, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia, and she was only

the second woman to be recognized by Yale and by Princeton for an honorary degree.

She never married but lived alone or with her brother and sister whom she supported for most of her life. She kept up an active pace on the lecture circuit throughout the east coast and midwestern states. Many notable literary figures, such as Andrew Lang, Henry James, Walt Whitman, and William Dean Howells became her friends and correspondents.

Writers and readers who were her contemporaries would find it strange that a century after she began writing, we can find few traces of her in either the literary history of the United States or in collections of American essays. Bringing back some of her work now, as well as pointing to those themes she developed, seems especially appropriate, because she addressed several issues that have a revived currency at the end of the twentieth century. Across the many and highly varied topics of her essays, three themes are dominant. The first concerns reading and writing and their interdependence with leisure, social class, and access; the second relates to women and their place in society, including the world of literature; and the third embraces her complex sense of the interdependence of historical forces and social institutions in such matters as poverty.

Reading and Writing

On the first theme, observations on reading and writing and their dependence on leisure time as well as access to resources, Repplier anticipated the current interest in the social contexts of reading and writing. When she was eighty, she remembered her own experience of learning to read. Here she reflects in the voice of herself as a ten-year-old.

> I am ten years old, and I can read. There does not seem to be anything remarkable about this circumstance, seeing that most little girls of ten have been reading since they were seven; but it was not so with me.... My mother, pardonably tired of the long years wasted on the first steps in the education of a child who she knew was not a fool, gave strict orders that no one should read me a line. The world of reality closed in upon me...I sized up the situation, surrendered at discretion, and quickly, though not easily, learned to read" (*Eight Decades*, pp. 3-4).

Of learning to write, she said:

> I am twenty years old, and I have begun to write. It is the only thing in the world that I can do, and the urge is strong. Naturally, I have nothing to say, but I have spent ten years learning to say that nothing tolerably well.

> Every sentence is a matter of supreme importance to me (*Eight Decades*, p. 9).

Her first book of essays, *Books and Men*, was published in 1888. Here she took on not only the tendency of elite critics to wish to tell readers what they *must* read, but she also registered her keen observations about the education of children, and especially of young women. As had many women of fiction and poetry before her, she noted the fact that for a woman to be "learned was to be held up to universal ridicule, and the only line of conduct open to her was to play the fool...." (*Books and Men*, p. 26). But Repplier observed also that often women who were rigorously drilled and kept down "blossomed perversely into brilliant and scholarly women" (*Books and Men*, p. 27). She noted the tendency of female authors toward moralistic literature for children and of women's particular fancy for being moral gatekeepers. Of several "authoresses" (her term), she noted that they "plainly considered that virtue, especially in the young, was of no avail unless constantly undergoing persecution." She pointed out that the heroines of such writing, "supernaturally righteous little girls, who pin notes on their fathers' dressing tables, requesting them to become Christians, and who endure the most brutal treatment—at their parents' hands—rather than sing songs on Sunday evening" are equaled only by older heroines, "who divide their time impartially between flirting and praying between indiscriminate kisses and passionate searching for light" (*Books and Men*, pp. 90-91).

Through most of her writings, she slashed at the self-promotion she saw among writers and critics. One of her most humorous essays, included in her book *Points of View* published in 1891, celebrated "books that have hindered me." Here she had the temerity to place in such a category not only boring and didactic books of reading for young children, but also John Milton's *Areopagitica* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Of Milton's work, she recalled its mysterious allusions to unknown people and places, and its phalanx of Greek and Roman names, as well as—to her mind—its unlikely combination of such topics as "the freedom of unlicenc'd printing" and the gods of Egypt and Isaiah's prophecies. She commented: "Erudition, like a bloodhound, is a charming thing when held firmly in leash, but it is not so attractive when turned loose upon a defenseless and unerudite public" (*Points of View*, p. 71).

For Stowe's classical work, Repplier's independence of spirit and disgust with overly simplistic characters and didactic purposes among women novelists led to sharp words. She noted that having read the work with the "innocent credulity of youth," she had concluded that "the thirteenth amendment was a ghastly error, and the [Civil] War had been fought in vain. She explained:

> Slavery, which had seemed to me before undeviatingly wicked, now shone in a new and alluring light. All things must be judged by their results, and if the result of slavery was to produce a race so infinitely superior to common humanity; if it bred strong, capable, self-restrained men like George, beautiful, courageous, tender-hearted women like Eliza, visions of innocent loveliness like Emmeline, marvels of acute intelligence like Cassy, children of surpassing precocity and charm like little Harry, mothers and wives of patient, simple goodness like Aunt Chloe, and finally, models of all known chivalry and virtue like Uncle Tom himself, then slavery was the most ennobling institution in the world, and we had committed a grievous crime in degrading a whole heroic race to our narrower, viler level (*Points of View*, pp. 75-76).

She went on to chide the gullible public who accepted the overly wrought and simplistic characters of the Stowe novel, suggesting a reading public who wished only to be entertained and not to be challenged to think more deeply about economic and political issues.

She further attacked literary canons and the imposing judgments of literary critics proclaimed as though necessary for all readers. In an article entitled "Literary Shibboleths," she quoted Samuel Johnson's reminder that a reader "ought to read just as inclination leads him, for what he reads as a task will do him little good" (*Points of View*, pp. 81-82). She particularly addressed the dismissal that critics of her time ("literary reformers" in her terms) made of women readers by their suggestions that "systematic reading" might not be possible for women.

There are many indications in Repplier's life that she found such statements preposterous and resented moreover the frightful proposal that *all* should be required to enjoy and appreciate all masterpieces. She wrote essays extolling reading outside the canon: English railway fiction, children's books, and popular novels. She not only bashed the canon but proposed some reordering of curricula for children and the liberal arts studies of older students.

In advocating more opportunity for choice of one's reading material and what we would call today reading beyond or outside the canon, she called on major literary figures for help. As evidence that "literary masterpieces" are not for everyone, she noted that Goethe hated Dante, while Scott "very cordially disliked him," and Voltaire had scant sympathy with *Paradise Lost*. She reminded American readers that Charles Lamb, the English essayist perhaps closest to the popular reading audience, took delight in openly breaking or ignoring all the rules laid down by those who would uphold literary judgements as applicable to all. She, like Lamb, recommended that readers, young and old, be valued as readers and encouraged to make decisions of their own. She

reminded readers that "a clear perception of our individual needs is something vastly different from idle preference based on an ignorant conceit." (p. 87). She had also an urgent wish to discourage "literary monogamy"—the practice by which literary critics celebrate one author by tearing down another and can find no better way of eulogizing one author than by heaping antithetical reproaches upon a competitor. (pp. 87-88).

This rejection of absolutes in reading and writing, as well as cultural taste, Repplier reinforced not only with her own skepticism and biting sarcasm, but also with her frequent reminder to readers (and critics and authors) that preferences varied with each generation, and the "absolute best, " and "must-reads" of any era would become the forgotten works of tomorrow.

> The object of criticism, it has been said, is to supply the world with a basis, a definition which cannot be accused of lacking sufficient liberality and breadth. Yet, after applying the principle for a good many years, it is discouraging to note that what has really been afforded us is less a basis than a battlefield, the din and tumult from which strike a discordant note in our lives (*Points of View*, p. 98)

Repplier not only struck discordant notes in her criticism of literary authority, but also in her views on women.

On Women

Virginia Woolf once wrote of Thomas Hardy: "Nothing is easier, especially with a writer of marked idiosyncracy, than to fasten on opinions, convict him [or her] of a creed, tether him [or her] to a consistent point of view." (*Collected Essays*, Volume I, p. 263). The same might be said of Repplier—especially with regard to her views on women. Her perspective on numerous matters related to women, but especially to women as writers and to their role in sociopolitical movements, shifted considerably and from time to time during her life, as she tried to handle the complex relationships between her childhood relations with her mother, her interior life and views on marriage and children, and the life of the times through which she was living. Her early turmoil with formal education, combined with her mother's disparagement of her looks and abilities, triggered a curious combination of commitment to writing *because* this was what her mother said she could and must do, and curiosity about matters of the world that could take her far from what was often for her the toil and trial of writing.

Thus, though she accepted the dictates of her mother for herself, she often and sometimes consistently for a period of time took as the topic of her essays the horror of preaching to others what they ought to do. On those topics of greatest importance to her through her life—reading and writing, women and children,

war, and the subtle transformation of key social units (such as the family) as a result of changing political and economic times—she had strong views. She often stated these, but she usually tried to do so with a considerable amount of levity, often with sarcasm, and almost always with some admonishment for those who wanted to dictate the course of thinking and actions of others.

It is critical to place Repplier's numerous writings on women in their contemporary contexts of various political and social movements. Keenly aware of the thinking of revisionist historians writing during her life, she herself took a revisionist strain in her interpretation of women—as writers, as individuals caught in conflict between public and private desires and duties, and as leaders of sociopolitical change. She would have rejected the label *feminist* for herself just as she rejected any label; she wanted to be known as one who was capable of growth and change, could choose friendships with men and women, and see events through her wide but random reading and distanced observational stance.

In addition, she was highly irreverent, frequently using satire for the form of impudence it can be. Someone has suggested "irreverence is the great weapon of minorities: it is an engine for teasing the powerful." (Quentin Bell, quoted in A. Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, 1986, p. 39). Repplier was on no topic quite so filled with satire and sarcasm as on the topic of women, and she spared neither males nor females. Jane Addams, of Hull House reputation, and other women who organized movements and attempted to dictate social policy for women and children and others without power, came in for especially sharp satirical treatment by Repplier. Here she was deeply judgmental, in spite of the fact that her family situation and sense of social propriety might have encouraged her to suppress her own views and feelings. Yet she could not agree to either intellectual or emotional concessions on matters related to women, and she often spoke with fierce enthusiasm on these matters.

She brought women of every station into her essays—Greek rustics, medieval women, and West Indian housewives. Woven extensively through her essays on every topic were quotes from women authors, especially those of the eighteenth century. She added also the possible perspectives of her contemporary female readers, working women, and women who were full-time caregivers and homemakers. Never willing to give only male writers or commentators a voice in her essays, she let her readers in on the diaries, letters, and autobiographical notes of women writers across time. She chided male critics for failing to agree on much of anything except either their omission of females or their indecisiveness about giving begrudging credit to the talents of female writers. But her barbs fell also on women writers—among them "female biographers" who too often wrote as enthusiasts for women writers rather than as critics of their actual art (*Books and Men*, p. 138).

Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Special Collections Library

Agnes Repplier
(1855-1950)

She was not, however, starry-eyed about the difficulties of women writers. She addressed in several essays the issue of whether or not women could both marry and have a successful writing life. For herself, she chose not to marry, and in an essay entitled "The Spinster, " as well as an essay entitled "Marriage in Fiction," she was very direct on her view of the ubiquitous "women-must-marry" message of her society. She detested the idea that women were made to give themselves for others and that they must not oppose their interests to the views of those around them. Repplier also was not afraid to ask the tough questions of her day and the decades since for every woman who gives serious thoughts to not marrying and to choosing instead a career:

> But what if she honestly prefers her own interests,—a not uncommon attitude of mind? What if patient endurance be the very last virtue to which she can lay claim? What if she is not in the least wistful, and never casts longing looks at her sister-in-law's babies…? What if, holding her life in her two hands, and knowing it to be her only real possession, she disposes of it in the way she feels will give her most content, swimming smoothly in the stream of her own nature, and clearly aware that happiness lies in the development of her individual tastes and acquirements? (*Compromises*, pp. 174-75).

In an essay that heavily foreshadows some current reflections on women writers, she wrote of "Three Famous Old Maids": Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, and Mary Mitford. She noted that successful and eminent literary women in England were often unmarried—

> not merely unmarried through stress of intervening circumstances—ill health, early disappointment, or a self-sacrificing devotion to other cares—but women whose lives were rounded and completed without that element which we are taught to believe is the mainspring and prime motor of existence (*Essays in Miniature*, p. 157).

To those who retorted that Charlotte Brontë both achieved literary fame and married, Repplier reminded them that she married when she was thirty-eight, died one year later, and thus passed her whole literary life in spinsterhood.

Repplier had harsh words also for those who attempted to find something sinister, evil, or sick in the state of being unmarried. She said of "feminine critics" that they

> find it difficult to believe that there is no hidden tale to tell, no secret and justifiable cause for this otherwise inexplicable behavior; and much time

> and patience have been exhausted in dragging shadowy memories to light (*Essays in Miniature*, p. 159).

One can easily imagine that Repplier would find it comfortable to address the many biographers of Emily Dickinson, for example, with her summative condemnation: "if there is one thing more than another to be avoided and ruthlessly condemned, it is this quiet assumption that a woman has parted with her heart, when she herself has breathed no word to warrant it" (*Essays in Miniature*, p. 169).

Some of Repplier's harshest judgments went to women writers who appeared to have gained their literary fame merely by being able to proclaim righteous thoughts and to entice the major male writers of the day to tea. Repplier had especially sharp words for women writers apparently unable to recognize as patronizing the acknowledgement that male writers offered to women in their "universal willingness to accept a good purpose as a substitute for good work" (*A Happy Half-Century*, p. 4). Repplier was particularly fond of faulting Hannah More (1745-1833) and Mrs. Barbauld (Anna Letitia Aiken Barbauld, 1743-1825) for their failures to see through the paternalistic attitudes of male critics. A writer strongly committed to the power of the word, Repplier lamented that these women's "genial absurdities" and "sentimental outpourings" enabled male critics to equate their "profitable pietism" with literary accomplishment. Repplier also condemned women who seemed unable to live without the attention of male critics or *literati* such as Charles Lamb or Samuel Coleridge. Female poets persisted through afternoon tea parties, dinner dances, and reams of letters, each, in Charles Lamb's words, "in the hope of having her nonsense put into a nonsensical Anthology" (*A Happy Half-Century*, p. 21).

Throughout her writings, Repplier minced no words in making clear her views of men who patronized women writers by commending and encouraging them as they would "a child's unsteady footsteps" (*A Happy Half-Century*, p. 113). She lamented that women's writings were cut off from a full range of criticism and honest appraisal, because critics gently accepted what they admitted among themselves were the "limitations of her art" and approved of "pious and pretty women writing pious and pretty poems" (p. 115). For Repplier: "There is no lie so little worth the telling as that which is spoken in pure kindness to spare a wholesome pang" (p. 112). Repplier pointed out that with no critics from the male ranks, women imitated only each other and perpetuated the weak results of empty praise.

In other matters besides that of the interactive world of reading and writing, Repplier encouraged women to stand on their own. In 1894, she wrote that men gave out favors and praise to women "because it did not occur to them for a moment that women claimed, or were ever going to claim, a serious place by

their sides" (*In the Dozy Hours*, p. 61). She further urged that women of the current period, as they gained entry to colleges and some political and social leadership positions, not set up "little standards of our own... rapturously applauding one another when the easy goal is reached" (p. 63). Repplier harshly condemned women who had a chance to provide advanced education for women and did not do so. Her wit could not cover her contempt for women who exacted special consideration on the score of their sex, and she foreshadowed many late twentieth-century protests among women in the labor market over tokenism or the assignment of women to "appropriate tasks."

Repplier noted in the early twentieth century, when she began to do most of her writing on women, that a commitment to equality for the sexes did not of itself make clear the shape that equality should take. She asserted that women who made calls for the vote or for other issues of suffragettes had not thought carefully through the meanings of equality. If equality were to come, then women could no longer hide behind their prior claims of difference. Differences were those that came not only with the biological conditions of sex, but as the result of socialization that encouraged women to take different views of the world and of their channels of knowing and of knowledge. Repplier seemed in some writings to call for taking the "anything he can do, I can do too" approach to women's rights; yet in most of her writing, she reminded the world that women, because they bore children, were stuck with them. They, unlike men, could not banish children from their sight and simply go on with their work, as the infamous Samuel Johnson and other male writers had done. Repplier argued strongly that women admit that if they chose to have children, their role in reproduction could be interpreted as both the source and the mechanism of patriarchal power.

She also pointed out what many late twentieth-century feminists have noted—that nineteenth-century women who claimed rights often did so by clinging to the law as the source of social change. Repplier noted that freedom was something more than that given by the law—freedom had to come in the awareness that one had choices. She often wrote about the conditions of women of different cultures and classes and expressed disgust that women's rights' advocates should set forth their claims for women's rights in universal terms, ignoring pressures and possibilities from different religions, cultures, and individual preferences. She also cautioned that overstated claims for feminists' causes would exclude other societal needs, such as those of the downtrodden. Complex societal issues did not lend themselves to simple we/they distinctions or dichotomies.

Social Vision

Her social vision, like her perspectives on women and issues affecting their roles and economic and political futures, was misread and misunderstood. Her critics often labelled her entire career, as well as her individual writings, with the embracing label "conservative." Her detractors failed first to acknowledge that she, like all of us, changed her mind throughout her long lifetime. Thus essays written only a few years apart often contradict each other, and her opinions of individuals as well as social movements shifted as her own breadth of experience widened or as she withdrew somewhat from the world, as she did during World War II. During World War I, she had devoted much of her reading and writing to keeping abreast of events, personalities, and political decision-making. These interests engaged her in debates with not only ordinary citizens as readers but also political leaders. In contrast, during World War II, she insisted that those who called on her not discuss the war. She felt unprepared and unwilling to treat the subject at length and preferred to talk of topics more pleasant to her and less likely to bring contention.

Her social vision centered during most of her life on reasons for the rifts in society and her attempts to sort out conditions about which something might be done from those that may well be inevitable. Often she criticized the tendency of "one half of the world to devote itself strenuously to the correction and improvement of the other half," and pointed out the "dismal consciousness of insecurity" such power plays caused (*Points of View*, p. 100) In matters literary as well as broadly cultural, she recommended distancing oneself from didactic tendencies (though at times, she herself took on such a persona in her writings). She particularly recommended that those of society viewed as "the innocents" in need of much tutoring and protection (included in these categories were women, the poor, blacks, and children) be left to reveal their own capabilities and integrity and not be so rigorously directed in everything from studies to recreations and religious beliefs.

Often bridled to her reflective censures and high-sounding recommendations for the spirit and mind of the "innocents," came her irreverent promotion of humor, laughter, and sheer pleasure. Even some of her favorite literary figures, such as George Eliot and Emile Zola, irritated her for their aspiration to instruct. She recommended less instruction and more pleasure: "What we need is, not more cultivation, but a recognized habit of enjoyment" (*Points of View*, p. 151).

With salty language and a most outrageous disdain for social convention, she proposed that works such as *Tom Jones* could be read by young people who would see that the hero was "having a jolly good time of it." Skipping any moral lesson from the work, the young could well be expected to try for themselves to see what such thorough-going drunkenness as that described in some Greek tales as well as English novels was really like. She argued that fiction could

not—and should not—be didactic; to try to be so was both unrealistic with respect to readers' responses and inappropriate for writers. She concluded:

> It is not the office of a novelist to show us how to behave ourselves; it is not the business of fiction to teach us anything.... Art is never didactic, does not take kindly to facts, is helpless to grapple with theories and is killed outright by a sermon. Its knowledge is not that of a schoolmaster, and is not imparted through the severe medium of lessons. It assumes no responsibilities, undertakes no reformation, and...proves nothing" (*Points of View*, pp 112-113).

It is entirely likely that Repplier read William James, who proposed the notion of cultural pluralism in the late nineteenth century. In Philadelphia, a city of many immigrants in its shipyards and with numerous families of blacks moving north after the Civil War, Repplier must have spent time pondering America's future handling of cultural pluralism. Within her writings that today we would interpret as being against a rigid canon and firm prescriptions for suitable interpretations of literature, Repplier buried broader notions of how those omitted from consideration by the half who wanted to improve the other half fared. Often referring to Dickens' novels and to the insights of Charles Lamb, she echoed in several forms this notion:

> ...we may at least remember that all natures do not develop on the same lines; that all goodness is not comprised within certain recognized virtues, or limited to certain fields of thought (*Points of View*, p. 133).

During World War I, when Repplier seemed to send her harshest criticism toward those whose patriotism was not clear, she wrote a series of essays on immigrants, Americanism, and patriotism. Though much in these essays borders on the xenophobic, she did not entirely lose her ability to reflect on why this might be the case. She wrote:

> Love for one's country is not a shallow sentiment, based upon self-esteem. It is a profound and primitive passion. It may lie dormant in our souls when all goes well. It may be thwarted and frustrated by the exigencies of party government. It may be dissevered from pride or pleasure. But it is part of ourselves, wholly beyond analysis, fed upon by hope and fear, joy and sorrow, glory and shame (*Counter Currents*, pp. 268-269).

Conclusion

The subtitle of these comments on Agnes Repplier suggest that writing—especially of essays—is a type of trial. In her writings from the last two decades of the nineteenth century through the first half-century of the twentieth century, Repplier was complex, ambiguous, often contradictory, and almost always satirical and irreverent. She lamented the fact that humans seemed to have strong desires to make others believe as they did, and yet she often had to face her own strong reluctance to reject certain aspects of her social system that she felt gave a satisfying order to society. Matters of courtesy, solitude, patriotism, and integrity—when espoused strongly—often gave her the label "conservative," and to these values she admitted strong allegiance. In spite then of her own protests against heavily didactic recommendations for others, she herself slipped into such a role from time to time. She, however, found less fault with society than many reformers of her lifetime, and her letters reveal that she was not unaware of her inconsistencies and vacillations on matters having to do with social class, patriotism, and the power of written language.

Why then was writing a trial for her and why, in particular, should we consider the essay a trial? The answer to the first question is that writing was her only means of livelihood, and she was on trial with each word for the first ten years of her life. Only beyond the age of thirty was she somewhat secure in the knowledge that she would find a publisher. Thus, she like every writer, found writing a constant source of trial, of facing condemnation or praise, rejection or acceptance. Since she had no other means of support, her use of writing as her only vocation made her the first and only woman until the 1950s who made her living exclusively through penning essays and finding a way into the public press of educated readers (such as those of *Harpers* and *Atlantic Monthly*).

The essay is a particular kind of trial by its very generic nature. It offers the occasion (hence the term "occasional piece") for writers to take up a favorite author to try the first hint of some seminal or even passing idea. The essay form is generally highly personal, because its major source of authority is in what the writer has learned from experience, in Montaigne's words "without any systems," and thus the writer may speak his or her meaning "in disjointed parts." The essay has since its origins in English in the sixteenth century been the form that most often expresses a distrust of custom, of fixed truths. Sometimes highly revisionist in force, the essay usually withholds direct statement of sentiment. It is dialogic not only within itself, enjoining the different voices and points of view of the writer herself, but is also in dialogue often with the public discourse on social and literary issues of its time. It assumes its readers are, to some extent, already in a conversation on its topic—and this often means that it assumes an active reading life that has brought familiarity with literature and classical works of political and social theory as well.

For the past decade or so, we have thought and debated about whether or not women have "a different voice." This question has slipped into numerous nooks and crannies of writing and reading. We have repeatedly raised it with regard to the fact that in our schools, we have reshaped the essay into an instrument of repression, ignoring its history as an open genre for the testing of ideas and the use of personal experience. We have begun to question the perpetuation of essays in anthologies and as models by almost exclusively white, male, and relatively leisured writers as the false model of the written form that colleges want students to use to display their knowledge and clear their passage into adulthood as workers. We have taken an open genre, potentially friendly to those of oral backgrounds—and as Brander Matthews noted—also inclined to ramble, chat, and yes, even gossip, and transformed it into what is in school an artificially defined, audienced, and shaped form.

Within academic and scientific writing, we have begun to face the problem of the ways in which research writing is reported, and we have turned back to the narrative in many proposals of ways to enliven such writing and make it accessible. Literary theorist Jane Tompkins has recently examined what the reshaping of essays into reports that deny emotion, intention, relationships, and commitment means especially for women writers. She notes that the post-structuralist way of understanding language and knowledge has brought with it even more language that distances reader from writer. Again, the essence of the essay—the dialogic give and take or trial of ideas between reader and writer—is lost because of the strong assertion of authority that the language of essays has taken on. She maintains what Repplier and the bulk of the history of the essay would support: the essay is a dialogic open form of writing that allows writer and reader to admit that the subject matters of which we write are continuous with our own lives and experiences. We cannot base knowledge solely in the denial of self and of emotion, motivation, intention, and experience (*New Literary History*, Vol. 19, 1987).

Within the essay, as in many of the spirited exchanges of "oral cultures" to which women and other marginalized non-authoritative voices have been primarily confined through history, there is no way to "prove" one's intelligence or linkage to intelligent others through elaborate systems of citation. The force and thus the central intelligence of the piece must be the writer's ability to engage the reader as partner, as part of a series of webs or networks of ideas that move and bend and shift in their trial. Ideas within an essay do not then build to a point or closing, but drop in throughout the piece, to be caught or captured and developed by the reader. Sociologist Nancy Chodorow has observed of the domestic activities of women that they have "a nonbounded quality"—diffuse, unending, moving out, not specifically delimited" (*The Reproduction of Mothering:*

Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender, 1979, p. 179). These words describe the essay as well.

The essay has been called the *genus universum*, a form made of migrations, alterations, and the refusal to let categories dictate or predestine its size, scope, content, or manner. These descriptions echo many characterizations of women's thinking and forms of expression—especially in conversation. Here women as writers and the essay as their genre, seem predestined—made for each other. Yet few women essayists in English have emerged, and of these, fewer still are included among the essayists designated as models in college classrooms or selected for reprinting in essay collections. The central inference we are left to draw is that institutional barriers, and certainly not those of genre, have kept women out of the circle of accepted essayists.

Beyond this conclusion of institutional blame and acknowledgement of society's loss of important voices, we must, however, note that Repplier managed over nearly sixty years to find her way into the pages of America's major magazines and publishing houses. Persistence, study, independence, irreverence, and attention to her words won for her a place analogous in the United States to that which Virginia Woolf held during her lifetime in England as an essayist. But Woolf's reputation remains, while Repplier's does not. Yet they wrote sometimes in similar ways on many of the same topics. Woolf had then and continues to have behind her the institutional force of the Bloomsbury group, as well as her fame in writing fiction. Repplier had neither a literary community nor entry to the literary establishment through writing literary works of imagination.

Raymond Williams has taught us about the evolution of the meaning of *literature* in Western culture. From the fifteenth century to the present, we have increasingly separated texts as literature from social praxis. Before this time, the term *literature* referred to a level of knowledge, a condition of being broadly educated through all kinds of writings and direct experiences. By the late Renaissance, it had come to be objectified in education as knowledge gained through books. During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term came to refer exclusively (and especially in the Anglo-Saxon world) to works of imagination only. This separation led to the removal from literature of texts of practical, historical, and even biographical—and essayistic—writing, and to the reservation of the term *literature* for only those works of imagination by individual "majority" authors. Before the 1950s in the United States, women who made the struggle to write, chose to do so primarily in those forms that would allow them entry to *literature*. The essay does not "count" as literature, and has not since the middle of the nineteenth century, when it, like biography and history, fell from inclusion as literature. Hence, whether consciously or not, women writers have themselves chosen not to take up the essay—in spite of its

prevalence with current reading audiences—and have sought instead to establish their reputations in "literary" achievement.

We would do well to acknowledge that Repplier herself recognized the changing fates of reputation and the risks in taking up the essay as the place to try ideas. She noted that any piece of writing is "woven into the tissue of things, into the warp and woof of social conditions...." (*A Happy Half-Century*, p. viii). Her reminder should offer some incentive that with change in the larger patterns of life and thought on matters related not only to gender, but also to genres, writing, reading, and power, we will also see new generations of women writers of the essay. Repplier's case demonstrates the force of individual resistance, and the extent to which determination can make it possible for a woman essayist to influence and impress her contemporaries.